

The AMBER Plan: Friend of Miss



In Riverside, Calif., a 10-year-old's mother reported her missing early one morning. After going door-to-door, trying to find information about the girl's disappearance, police concluded that a former babysitter had taken her and was capable of harming her. Officials immediately issued an AMBER alert. A little later, the California Highway Patrol requested the Nevada Highway Patrol to activate their Emergency-Alert System (EAS) as well, in case the suspect had fled across state lines. That afternoon, a Nevada motorist saw the suspect's vehicle, recognized it from the alert, and notified authorities. The suspect was apprehended, and the 10-year-old was reunited safely with her mother.

In Houston, Texas, a 5-year-old girl was lured into a stolen ambulance and kidnapped by a man in his 20s. Police said he enticed five children between 4 and 8 years old from their apartment complex into the ambulance, saying it was a playroom. Before he could drive off, though, all but the 5-year-old escaped. Not long afterward, an AMBER alert was broad-

cast, and a man reported seeing the child and suspect in his neighborhood. The police found and reunited the girl with her family and arrested the abductor—all within a matter of three hours.

In Melbourne, Fla., a 9-year-old girl, who was new to the area, disappeared. Law enforcement searched for two hours, then issued an AMBER alert. About 30 minutes later, a motorist listening to his radio sighted the missing child walking down a street. He notified a police officer on a traffic detail, and the event had a happy ending.

These are just some of the success stories that have surfaced in recent years, thanks to the AMBER (America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response) Plan. Although not launched nationwide until the fall of 2001 by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the AMBER Plan was created in 1996. It's a legacy to the then-9-year-old Amber Hagerman, a bright little girl

who was kidnapped and brutally murdered while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas.

This tragedy shocked and outraged the entire community. Residents called radio stations in the Dallas area and suggested they broadcast special “alerts” to prevent such incidents in the future. In response to this concern, the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers teamed up with local law-enforcement agencies in northern Texas and developed an early-warning system.

Anytime a serious child-abduction case arises, broadcasters issue an urgent bulletin,

using the EAS, formerly called the Emergency Broadcast System. They air a description of the missing child and suspected abductor. This same concept is used to warn citizens about severe-weather emergencies. The goal of an AMBER alert is to instantly organize an entire community to help search for and safely return the missing child. Statistics show that an abducted child’s greatest enemy is time.

Once law enforcement has been notified about an abducted child, they first must determine if the case meets the AMBER Plan’s criteria for triggering an alert. Each program

Missing Children



Some states are incorporating electronic highway signs like this one into their AMBER Plans.

establishes its own criteria; however, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests these three items be met before an alert is activated:

- Law enforcement confirms a child has been abducted.
- Law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.
- There is enough descriptive information about the child, the abductor, and his vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

If these criteria are met, descriptions and pictures of the missing child, the suspected abductor, his vehicle, and any other details available are faxed to radio stations designated as primary stations under the EAS. These stations then use the Emergency-Alert System to send the information to participating area radio and TV stations and cable systems, which immediately broadcast it to millions of listeners.

Radio stations interrupt regular program-



ming to announce the alert, and TV stations and cable systems run a crawl line on the screen, along with a picture of the child. Some states also are incorporating electronic highway billboards into their plans, displaying information about the child, abductor and suspected vehicle that drivers might look for on highways.

An AMBER-alert message encourages the public to look for the missing child or suspect. You become the ears and eyes of local law enforcement. In the event you spot a child, adult or vehicle fitting the description, immediately call the telephone number given in the AMBER alert and provide authorities as much information as you know.

In response to NCMEC's effort to ensure the AMBER Plan is implemented effectively, the Federal Communications Commission has adopted a special "Abducted Child Statement" event code (Code CAE). This code will be used within the Emergency-Alert System when the AMBER Plan is activated. Until now, broadcasters have activated the plan as a "Civil Emergency Message." However, these alerts sometimes have been confused with other civil emergencies, such as floods and tornadoes. The NCMEC and the FCC believe this special code will help mobilize a community more quickly when a missing-child tragedy strikes. They are encouraging all broad-

cast stations to adopt the new code.


How can you establish a plan in your area? It's not difficult. You just have to work with the appropriate law-enforcement officials and local media leaders. Here is a model of how to start an AMBER Plan in your community:

- Contact your local law-enforcement agency and ask for their public information officer (PIO). Ask the PIO if there is an organization that brings together law-enforcement officers from various counties or cities on a regular basis to discuss community needs. For example, many areas fall within the jurisdiction of a Council of Governments, a law-enforcement association, or a community policing-type organization. Ask for a contact name within that organization.


- Contact the appropriate person within the local law-enforcement association and schedule a meeting to introduce the idea of law-enforcement participation in starting a local AMBER Plan. Suggest that the appropriate person contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to obtain an AMBER-alert handbook and a copy of the AMBER-alert training tape.

- Once local law-enforcement agencies demonstrate support for establishing a program in your community, work with them to determine the most effective way to enlist the help of general managers of local radio and TV stations. One suggestion is for the law-enforcement agencies to hold a luncheon with general managers to discuss the need for a local program.


- Once you have gained support from local law-enforcement agencies and some parts of the local media, establish a task force, consisting of law enforcement, media representatives, and a community liaison. This task force should be responsible for developing and overseeing your local AMBER Plan. When you have a plan, create a public-service announcement to advertise it. Familiarity with the plan will help ensure it achieves maximum effectiveness.

How successful is the AMBER Plan? Figures published in 2002 showed it has been credited with recovering 43 children. The program's popularity has spread dramatically since the original plan was established. The same 2002 figures revealed 85 modified versions have been adopted at local, regional and statewide levels, and 34 states have a statewide plan. 

Ashore



If someone wanted to abduct a couple of small children, he couldn't ask for a better opportunity than this...



...Chances are, though, a would-be abductor would think twice about trying to take the same little girls in this situation.